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Systematic analysis in counterterrorism: Messages on an Islamist Internet-forum

Renfer, Marc ; Haas, Henriette

Abstract: Five easily memorized formulas of Systematic Observation help the analyst to be a more proficient observer and to make sure that nothing has been left out. They are: I. Compare the object of observation to models or to similar cases. II. Separate formal aspects from the contents and analyze them separately. III. Structure the object into functional elements, and explore every one of them. IV. Explore inconsistencies, contradictions, mistakes, or astonishing coincidences. V. Discover the absence of signs (negative signs of evidence). Only after going through the process of systematically registering every important detail, we are able to draw first hypotheses. Then, hypotheses must be checked for their plausibility in listing systematically every sign for and every sign against them, as well as all indeterminate signs, too, in order to get a clear view of the case, and to ensure the best use of the available intelligence. It is true that the consequent use of those formulas demands a considerable initial effort which can only be afforded in cases of some importance. But with experience and routine analysts will grasp much more signs of evidence right from the beginning, and save themselves a lot of unnecessary work that can be caused by pursuing wrong assumptions. In the long run, the assembled inventory of signs evidence does not lose its value. Undoubtedly, by applying the presented rules of systematic observation, the result of our work will be of higher analytical value.

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Systematic Analysis in Counterterrorism: Messages on an Islamist Internet-Forum

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by

MARC A. RENFER & HENRIETTE S. HAAS

(with an introduction by Urs von Daeniken, Director of the Swiss Intelligence Service SAP)

Corresponding author's address (2014):

Henriette Haas Ph.D., adjunct professor of forensic psychology
c/o Klinische Psychologie mit Schwerpunkt Psychotherapieforschung
Psychologisches Institut der Universität Zürich
Binzmühlestr. 14/16
CH-8050 Zürich
Switzerland
E-mail: henriette.haas@psychologie.uzh.ch
Homepage (with supplemental material) <http://www.henriette-haas.com/index.html>

URS VON DAENIKEN,
DIRECTOR OF THE SWISS INTELLIGENCE SERVICE SAP

INTRODUCTION

As Intelligence officers we are often asked to make statements based on very few clues. Whether the pieces of intelligence were self-collected, received by other services or based on public sources, the credibility of any good interpretation of the accessible material depends on a careful review of all details.

Analysis can be particularly difficult when original texts need to be translated from a foreign language and when they stem from authors of non-western cultures. The following paper describes a systematic approach used by the Swiss Intelligence Service (SAP). The procedure described is illustrated by the authentic case of messages among extremists going on the website “www.islamic-minbar.com”, a case that is currently being prosecuted by the Swiss Federal Justice (see also disclaimer in endnote ¹).

For several years, Intelligence Services have been aware that the Internet is used as the most important tool for the dissemination of Jihadist propaganda. There are even cases of known indoctrination and recruitment of individuals who were turned into violent extremists in chat-rooms. Even if it was possible to monitor all terrorist websites permanently, all messages posted in chat-rooms cannot be controlled. Without permanent monitoring, the intelligence gathered from OSINT or chat-rooms often becomes untraceable and its authors remain anonymous. While advanced methods of intelligence analysis such as the described cannot replace author-identification, they are still useful for a preliminary evaluation of a given situation in order to determine which sites or individuals should be more closely observed or even investigated. — Urs Von Daeniken

Marc A. Renfer has graduated with a Masters degree in Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies from University of Berne. He is an expert in Islamism and Oriental languages currently working as an intelligence analyst in the counter terrorism section of the Swiss Service for Analysis and Prevention (SAP).

Henriette S. Haas, Ph.D. is scientific advisor to the SAP staff and lecturer of forensic psychology at University of Zurich. Author of three books and 40 research papers, she is a former professor of criminology at the Swiss School of Forensic Science and Criminology at University of Lausanne.

CHALLENGES OF COUNTERTERRORISM ANALYSIS

Counterterrorism analysts are facing two challenges: either there is very little intelligence to work on, or else there is too much. Often the two characteristics are combined, in the sense that there is a lot of insignificant information that needs to be evaluated in order to find a few important clues that may (or may not) be hidden inside it. Particularly, this is the case in Internet communication, where no physical evidence (such as fingerprints, DNA, handwriting) can be collected. Nonetheless, the Internet is one of the most important sources in counterterrorism analysis. According to a report of the Center for Strategic and International Studies², monitoring the Internet and extracting information about Jihadists must become a priority: “Given the degree to which radical Islamists depend on the web, Western governments must

find ways to cultivate the specific technological and linguistic expertise to better penetrate these valuable intelligence sources”.

The secret of good analysts is that they are excellent observers. They work hard to learn and memorize everything about the case—and then observe very carefully. Like any human activity observation is not just a natural gift, it can be learned and improved by learning a systematic procedure. The purpose of this paper is to present such an approach and to demonstrate its application on a case of counter-terrorism analysis. The procedure consists in the application of five rules of "Systematic Observation", which will guide and structure the analytical process in a methodical way. The rules are deduced from epistemology and cognitive psychology by the second co-author (Haas).³

THE CASE: PRESUMED DEMANDS BY HOSTAGE TAKERS IN IRAQ

The example we present as an illustration is based on a real case of presumed demands of hostage takers in Iraq, found on an Islamist website.¹ The historical background of the events is the following: Since the end of the second Iraq war, European states have soldiers stationed in Iraq to help stabilize and reconstruct the country. Late in August 2004, two French journalists were kidnapped in the southwest of Baghdad. Terrorists spread a video of the captives, pleading for help and urging their government to repeal the headscarf law. Some Islamic groups confessed to the hostage taking on the Internet, nevertheless, the authenticity of these first confessions was analyzed and found dubious. During this period, several agencies of homeland security discovered the website “www.islamic-minbar.com” hosted and administered in Switzerland.⁴ It contained a forum on which Jihadist propaganda, such as beheadings and war scenery were shown. The attached discussion board was often visited by Islamist extremists. On this forum, six messages of the presumed hostage takers were then posted under the name of one Abu Muhammad. They fell precisely in the weeks of early September 2004. The question arose: Are those communiqués authentic manifestos or ransom notes or not? By analyzing these messages, reproduced below in Arabic and in English translation, as an illustration, we want to address the following methodological issues in this paper:

- What can be deduced from such messages in terms of counterterrorism analysis?
- How can analysts make the best possible use of such intelligence?
- Is it possible to distinguish impostors from real terrorists in the absence of physical evidence?

Table 1: The first message on www.islamic-minbar.com

THE IRAQI ISLAMIC ARMY – DECLARATION CONCERNING THE RETAINED FRENCH	
Sender: Abu Muhammad	
Sent: Sept. 1 st , 2004 at 12.37	
<p><i>Peace be on you</i></p> <p><i>Declaration issued by the Iraqi Islamic Army</i></p> <p><i>The case of the two French hostages in Iraq belongs to the commander of Islam and of the Muslims, Sheikh Usama Bin Laden – God is behind success We want a public answer or a fatwa of the Sheikh and we want that the Sheikh publishes it on the al-Jazeera channel</i></p> <p><i>We belong to God and to Him we shall return</i></p> <p><i>The Iraqi Islamic Army</i></p> <p><i>God is greater, and there is no god towards [sic!] God</i></p>	<p>السلام عليكم</p> <p>بيان صادر عن الجيش الاسلامي العراقي</p> <p>ان امر الرهينتين الفرنسيين في العراق امرهما مرجع الى ولي امر الاسلام و المسلمين الشيخ اسامه بن لادن و الله من وراء التوفيق نريد ردا علني اوفتوى من الشيخ و نريد من الشيخ ان يعلنها على قناة الجزيرة</p> <p>و انا لله وانا اليه راجعون</p> <p>الجيش الاسلامي العراقي</p> <p>الله اكبر و لا اله الا الله</p>
No comments.	

Table 2: The second message on www.islamic-minbar.com

LAST APPEAL TO SHEIKH USAMA BIN LADEN CONCERNING THE FRENCH HOSTAGES	
<p>Sender: Abu Muhammad Sent: Sept. 1st, 2004 at 16.21</p>	
<p><i>In the name of God</i> <i>The Iraqi Islamic Army</i> <i>The High Commission for Fatwas</i> <i>The last appeal</i> <i>We address this appeal to the Connamder [sic!] of Islam and of the Muslims Sheikh Usama Bin Laden so that he will send us a fatwa on the case of the two French hostages What should we do with them We want an answer within the next five hours given the fact that we have sent you already an appealn [sic!] before this one We want an answer today Give us a fatwa God have mercy with you What is the sentence May God be behind the decision Peace be upon you and the Mercy of God The Iraqi Islamic Army</i></p>	<p>بسم الله الجيش الاسلامي العراقي الهيئة العليا لافتناء النداء الاخير انا نوجه هذا النداء الى ولي امير الاسلام والمسلمين الشيخ اسامه بن لادن لكي يفتينا بقضية الرهينتين الفرنسيين ماذا نفعل بهما نريد الرد بعد خمس ساعات كما انا وجهنا لكم ندائن قبل هذا نريد الرد اليوم افتونا يرحمكم الله ما هو الحكم و الله من وراء القصد و السلام عليكم ورحمة الله الجيش الاسلامي العراقي</p>
<p>Comment by one al-Qayrawani (16.30):</p>	
<p><i>It is impossible that Usama Bin Laden answers within five hours You should wait longer or consult the Sharia, which gives enough advice whether to kill to have mercy or to demand a ransom</i></p>	<p>Comments are not reproduced in the Arabic original.</p>

Abu Muhammad's reply (16.35):	
<p><i>Thank you God bless you</i></p> <p><i>Yet we want an answer from the Sheikh</i></p>	<p>شكرا بارك الله بك لكننا نرجو استجابته من الشيخ</p>
Other comments.	

Table 3: The third message on www. www.islamic-minbar.com

FROM THE LAND OF THE TWO RIVERS TO THE LAND OF THE TWO HOLY CITIES	
<p>Sender: Abu Muhammad</p> <p>Sent: Sept. 2nd, 2004 at 02.40</p>	
<p><i>In the name of God the Beneficent the Merciful</i></p> <p><i>Praise to God blessings and peace on God's messenger Muhammad</i></p> <p><i>So this is an open message from the Land of the Two Rivers to the Earth of the Two Holy Cities</i></p> <p><i>We in Iraq deplore the injustice [sic!] of your judgments on us They plead religion and they send their airplanes to bomb our Land So what injustice [sic!] is this I want you to stops [sic!] the injustice and the tyranny and to frees [sic!] the Land of the Two Holy Cities from this</i></p> <p><i>No place for the infidel among us</i></p> <p><i>Peace be upon you</i></p> <p><i>Your brother Abu Muhammad</i></p>	<p>بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم الحمد لله و السلام و الصلاة على رسول الله محمد اما بعد فهذه رساله مفتوحه من بلاد وادي الرافدين الى ارض الحرمين</p> <p>انا في العراق نشكو من ظلم حكامكم الينا يدعون الدين و يدعون الطائرات تقصف ارضا فاي ظلم هذا اريد منكم ان تقلعو تضام الظلم و الطغيان و تحررو ارض الحرمين منه</p> <p>لا مكان للكافر بيننا و السلام عليكم اخوكم ابو محمد</p>
No comments.	

Table 4: The forth message on www.islamic-minbar.com

THE ISLAMIC ARMY HAS NOW DECIDED THE DESTINY OF THE FRENCH HOSTAGES – GOD KNOWS BETTER, AND PEACE	
Sender: Abu Muhammad Sent: Sept. 2 nd , 2004, at 05.38	
<p><i>In the name of God</i></p> <p><i>The Iraqi Islamic Army</i></p> <p><i>God is greater and praise be to God.</i></p> <p><i>The High Commission of the Army command</i></p> <p><i>There is no god but God.</i></p> <p><i>Declaration of the Army</i></p> <p><i>Paise [sic!] to God who has blessed the Mujahidin with the success of capturing the two French.</i></p> <p><i>Yesterday we have addressed a message to Sheikh Usama Bin Laden to demand an order on behalf of the two hostages, but he has not heard it as we believe</i></p> <p><i>Thus the last hours will mark the destiny of the hostages in Iraq Two solutions lie ahead of us either a ransom or a beheading</i></p> <p><i>The Eminent said «Thereafter it is either secure site or ransom...»</i></p> <p><i>O our God, we have truly asked for a fatwa by the Sheikh but we have received nothing o our God God be a witness to his defence of the believers</i></p> <p><i>The Iraqi Islamic Army</i></p> <p><i>Striking armour of the Umma</i></p>	<p>بسم الله</p> <p>الجيش الاسلامي العراقي</p> <p>الله اكبر و الحمد لله</p> <p>الهيئة العليا لقيادة الجيش</p> <p>لا اله الا الله</p> <p>بيان صادر عن الجيش</p> <p>احمد لله الذي وفق المجاهدين لالقاء القبض على الفرنسيين</p> <p>لقد وجهنا يوم امس رساله الى الشيخ اسامه بن لادن نطلب منه امرا بشأن الرهينتين لكنه لم يسمعه على ما نعتقد</p> <p>لذا سوف تحدد الساعات الاخيره مصير الرهائن في العراق فامامنا حلين اما الفديه او النحر</p> <p>قال تعالى (فأما مأمّن بعد اما فداء)</p> <p>الهم انا طلبنا من الشيخ فتوى فلم نحصل عليها الهم فشهد الله يدافع عن المؤمنين</p> <p>الجيش الاسلامي العراقي</p> <p>درع الامه الضارب</p>

Comment by one Jama'at at-Tawhid al-Islamiyya:	
<i>You should not confuse Europe with the USA, Brother Abu Muhammad In recognition of the European politics and in the name of Islam we demand that the hostages be freed.</i>	

Table 5: The fifth message on www.islamic-minbar.com

REPLY TO JAMA'AT AT-TAWHID AL-ISLAMIYYA'S COMMENT	
Sender: Abu Muhammad Sent: Sept. 3 rd , 2005, at 06.23	
<i>In the name of God</i> <i>We have expected a fatwa by our Emir the Sheikh Usama but it was impossible for him to give it to us And alas for this reason we have decided to release them It was because of the Muslims who would be dissatisfied if we had slaughtered them</i> <i>The Islamic Army in Iraq</i> <i>Peace O Jama'at at-Tawhid al-Islamiyya</i> <i>fear God</i>	<p>بسم الله</p> <p>لقد كنا ننتظر فتوة من طرف شيخنا اسامة ولكن لم يكن بامكانه ارسالها لنا لذلك قررنا إفراجهما وهذا لسبب تعرض المسلمين في حالة ضيحهما</p> <p>الجيش الإسلامي في العراق</p> <p>سلام يا جماعة التوحيد الإسلامية</p> <p>اتقوا الله</p>
Comment by one al-Maqdisi:	
<i>Abu Muhammad, who are you to speak in the name of the Iraqi Islamic Army</i> <i>You need patience</i>	

Table 6: The sixth and last message on www.islamic-minbar.com

THE ISLAMIC ARMY – LAST DELAY – HERE ARE OUR DEMANDS	
<p>Sender: Abu Muhammad Sent: Sept. 6th, 2004, at 12.13</p>	
<p><i>In the name of God</i> <i>The Islamic Army in Iraq</i> <i>The High Command</i> <i>Military declaration</i> <i>After careful deliberations the Army has finally decided on the following demands for the liberation of the two French hostages</i> <i>The recognition of the armistice between them and the Sheikh Usama Bin Laden</i> <i>The payment of a 5 million dollar ransom</i> <i>The commitment to refrain from any military or commercial involvement in Iraq</i> <i>These demands remain for a maximal duration of 48 hours until their acceptance Beware and do not deter us like you have done at at-Tayfiyya on the day when we wanted to deliver them But God will demonstrate your mistakes to you in the last</i> <i>Remark we want the fulfilment of one of the two demands</i></p>	<p>بسم الله الجيش الاسلامي في العراق القياده العليا بيان عسكري لقد قرر الجيش و بعد مشاورات كثيره على المطالب التاليه للافراج عن الرهينتين الفرنسيين الموافقه على الهدنه بينهم و بين الشيخ اسامه بن لادن دفع الفديه قدرها 5 مليون دولار التعهد بعدم المشاركه العسكريه و التجاربه في العراق هذه المطالب امامكم مده اقصاها 48 ساعه للموافقه عليها و اياكم ان تقصفونا كما فعلتم في الطيفيه يوم اردنا ان نسلمهم لكن فضحك الله في الحضره الاخير ملاحظه نرجو الموافقه على احد الشرطين</p>
No comments.	

Before demonstrating how to analyse systematically such messages (in cases, where there is little or no material evidence and almost nothing is known from operations), let us turn to some theoretical issues concerning the procedure of scientific observation.

DEDUCTION OF THE FIRST RULE FROM THEORIES OF PERCEPTION

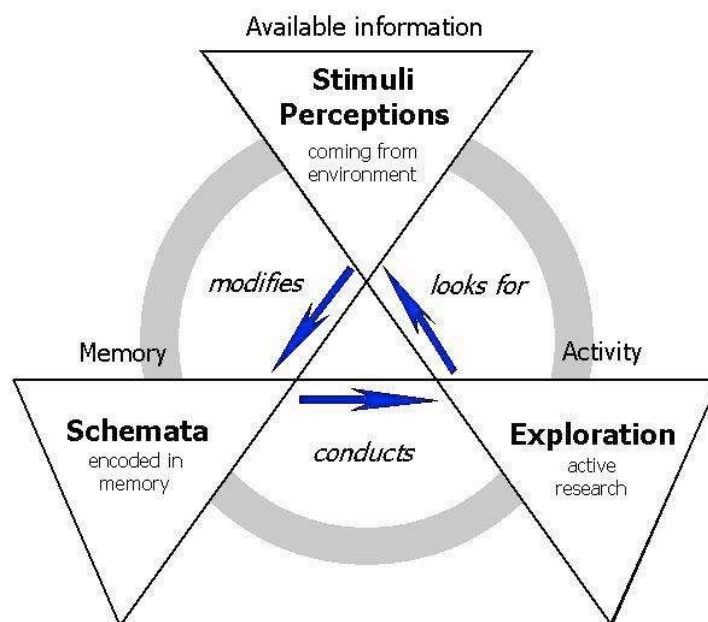
THE FIRST RULE OF SYSTEMATIC OBSERVATION:

Compare the object of observation to models, theories, standards and similar cases

Karl Popper⁵ defined observation as a perception; however a perception that has been conceived and prepared in advance: there is always a particular interest, a question or a problem preceding an observation, in other words, a theoretical issue. So, if we want to improve our case observation, we need to know more about perception. Cognitive theory takes into account the contribution of the perceiving subject. Ciccone⁶ wrote: *“Perception is an activity. Perceiving is not a passive record of reality as a form, which could produce identical replicas. Perception invents and constructs reality, in the process of discovering it.”*

Neisser⁷, conceiving a synthesis of the “constructivists” and the “direct perceptionists” approaches to cognitive theory, proposed a perceptual cycle involving the perception of stimuli, the active exploration and the observer’s pre-existing knowledge:

Table 7: Neisser's perceptual cycle in cognitive psychology (in Eysenck & Keane⁸)



The schemata contain collections of knowledge derived from past experience. They allow us to recognize what is being perceived and to redirect exploration towards more relevant environmental stimuli. Note also, that there is the possibility that some clues from the environment do not match the schemata. In that case, completing the circle, a schema must be modified or the stock of schemata, encoded in our memory, must be enlarged.

Untrained observers will enter the cycle at point “Exploration” and start directly to explore the stimuli. But—and this is our first rule—we can also enter at point “Schemata” by consulting

models and scientific literature first, thus improving our personal supply of schemata. The search for models and literature should start at the very beginning of a case, to guarantee that no important piece of intelligence is irretrievably lost or forgotten. The comparison with a model cannot only attract our attention to details otherwise neglected; it can do even more by helping to realize differences between the object of observation and the consulted models. Thus we may be led to new, unknown or atypical aspects of a case.

Observing the case of Islamic-Minbar.com with the help of models

In our case, one would obviously use other examples of Islamist claims or threats as models. Unfortunately, there are not many such writings besides some Internet-confessions of unconfirmed origin. For instance, most experts consider the *Abu Hafs al-Masri Brigades*, claiming to be the perpetrators of the Madrid attack, as pure fiction⁹. Hence, we cannot use those letters as functional models. Nevertheless, the absence of an undoubtedly genuine claim for responsibility of Jihadist attacks represents an important observation by itself.

Even though other Islamist claims do not seem to be of much value for examining the “islamic-minbar”-case, several other models can serve our purpose as well, and help us finding evidence in the messages posted on the forum:

- Terrorist and hostage takers manifestos and ransom notes in general
- Internet chats by Muslims on other websites
- Political and ideological writings of Islamists and Jihadists
- The Qur'an and other religious texts (Hadith, Fiqh, Fatwas)
- Arabic language systems (grammar, syntax, style)

By using each of these models, and thus structuring our approach, we can discover a huge amount of interesting evidence. Applying linguistics¹⁰, we might focus on the term *yarhamukum Allah* in the second message. It is literally translated by “God have mercy with you” and expresses condolences in the dialects of the Middle East, a strange assertion in our context. In North-African dialects however, it simply means a polite request, thus perfectly fitting with the message's sense. So, by using a linguistic comparison, we get a first clue on Abu Muhammad's origin.

Using religious discourse as a model, another observation refers to the messages beginning with “In the name of God”. This is a shortened version of the *Basmala*, the religious commitment that introduces the chapters of Qur'an as well as other texts with a religious connotation. The complete formula “*In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate*” is only present in the third message.

Another good example of how focussing our observation by the use of models is the finding that hostage taker manifestos usually contain details attesting insider knowledge of the case, in order to prove its authenticity. In this respect, our messages do not deliver much. The only indication is a reference in the sixth message to a presumed hostage taking or exchange incident at a place called *at-Tayfiyya*. By using open source intelligence as a reference¹¹, we can establish that a location in the South of Baghdad bears this name, but we are not able to confirm that there has been any occurrence corresponding to the claim on Islamic-Minbar.com. Nor can we exclude that we are dealing with the information from an insider.

RECONSTRUCTING AN EVENT BY PERCEIVING AND INTERPRETING SIGNS

THE SECOND RULE OF SYSTEMATIC OBSERVATION:

Separate formal aspects from the contents and analyze them separately

Working on a case is reconstructing a unique historical event between multiple actors by taking into account and interpreting different signs. Thus the sign is the smallest unit of perception. Nordby¹² explained that an important part of observing implies recognizing the sense of a sign and the task of reconstructing its meaning within its context. A careful analyst wants to take notice of all potential signs, without judging their relevance at first.

But what is a sign? A simple definition says that a sign can be anything, which determines something else. According to Charles S. Pierce¹³, a sign is “*something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity*”. The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure¹⁴ found that the sign is an entity with two faces: the (outer) appearance of the sign and the (inner) meaning of the sign. The appearance of a sign can have no relation at all to its signification, for instance the appearance of the linguistic sign composed by the four letters F–R–O–G has nothing to do with any animal, but by pure convention, the so represented word “FROG” bears a meaning which refers to the animal 🐸.

Forensic evidence can be considered as the set of all signs of evidence found on the crime scene(s), the victim(s) and potential suspects and the same is true for gathering intelligence on a case. Contrary to linguistic signs, which have a universal signification, the meaning of signs of evidence is highly individual. Some signs can mean exactly the opposite of their appearance, because they are meant to deceive. For instance, a gift, appearing to be a sign of affection, can in reality be an attempt to bribe somebody.

As a consequence of the double nature of the sign (appearance and signification), we can state the second principle of systematic observation: It is necessary to consider separately those aspects that refer to the formal structure (or appearance) of the object and those that refer to its contents (or signification). To avoid mistaken deductions, we must strictly limit our observation to the formal structure first and make conclusions on its contents only in a latter step.

Applying the rule of the two sides of the sign to the case

Regarding the present messages, we shall thus observe first how they were formally composed, and only afterwards what they tell us. So, for the analysis of the website we must translate the messages as accurately as possible, maybe even in several versions, and including also such characteristics as spelling mistakes.

On the formal level, we can state that the messages affirm being written by a group-member of the Iraqi Islamic Army (*al-Jaysh al-Islami al-Iraqi*), a Jihadist terror group, which does indeed exist. According to Raphaeli¹⁵ it is known to have taken hostages and “*threatened to execute a Philippine national unless the Philippines withdrew its small contingent of 60 soldiers from Iraq. The threat was taken seriously and the Philippines withdrew its soldiers.*” However, we have no proof whatsoever linking the messages to this Iraqi terror group. The IT address alone will tell us next to nothing. Extremists and terrorists use changing IT addresses that are assigned to a variety of countries. It is also possible, that an Iraqi terrorist made a veiled telephone call to a sympathizer somewhere else, who put the message on the net.

There is another interesting piece of evidence in terms of formal linguistics, namely the spelling mistakes. The sentence in the first message: “There is no god towards (*ila*) God” should be: “There is no god but (*illa*) God”. This verse reflects the *Shahada*, the core belief of Islam. It is part of the call for prayer and pronounced several times a day by every practicing Muslim. It is noteworthy that our perpetrator wrote incorrectly this most basic and respectable saying. Was he in such a stress or in a hurry that he made a spelling mistake¹⁶ (he wrote the phrase correctly in the forth message)? As we know from other hostage takings, it is a fact that perpetrators are often under great stress once they have the hostages in their power. Yet, regarding the frequency of spelling mistakes in general, the third message contains considerably more typos than the other ones—a significant discrepancy.

OBSERVING COMPLEX OBJECTS BY STRUCTURING THEM

THE THIRD RULE OF SYSTEMATIC OBSERVATION:

Structure the object into functional elements (according to the models),
and explore each of them

Looking at all of the six messages on the Islamist website, we are facing the problem of losing the overview of all the material there is. If we want to increase the accuracy of our case observation, we need—above all—to perceive and describe all signs of evidence and not just some of them. In order to achieve this, the analyst must make out the underlying structure(s) of the messages and define all functional elements belonging to a proposed structure. Each element must then be described individually in a process that can be time-consuming. If one selects only what comes at hand, like an untrained observer, one may be tempted to interpret the case on partial grounds and be totally misled. Fragmentation of the evidence by an unsystematic approach can also cause fruitless discussions and erroneous decisions.

Bierwisch¹⁷ referred to the principle of structuralism: “[...] *you don’t observe human communication and behaviour as isolated phenomena, but on a basis of a systematic relationship, which determines their structure.*” For the development of the principles of systematic observation we need to know more about structuralism. Linguistics, the science of the structure of language, was first to deal with the difficulties of dissecting an immaterial object into its functional elements. Grawitz¹⁸ concluded: “*For de Saussure, the true object of linguistics, far from being offered to immediate observation, is the product of a construction. [...] Structuralism has a very peculiar conception of the linguistic system: it is essentially considered as a system of signs. [...] The system appears like a net of differences between signs [...] Linguistic research appears from then on mostly as a definition of minimal units, separated by an operation of commutation: whatever changes the meaning when it is substituted by another element can be considered a minimal unit.*”

Here is an illustration from linguistics:

Table 8: Smallest units within textual structures

<i>The word</i>	<i>The letter of the alphabet</i>	<i>The typographic strike</i>
some <u>bad</u> words	s <u>o</u> m e	<u>a</u>
↓	↓	↓
some <u>nice</u> words	s <u>a</u> m e	<u>a</u>

While changing the sense, the word and the letter both function as minimal units of a linguistic object. The serif—on the other hand—cannot be considered a minimal unit in a linguistic model, as it is only modifying the shape of the letter but not the meaning of the message. In another model however, e.g. hand-writing analysis, the stroke can be essential as a determinative minimal unit within the systematic observation.

Marvin Minsky¹⁹, in his theory of artificial intelligence, pointed out that within each structure, there is an inherent function, and the components represent its sub-functions. Grawitz²⁰ described the position of the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss²¹ who applied this method to social science: “[...] *the structure implies limited characteristics. Combinations and transformations of them permit to pass from one system to another and to understand their relationships. The idea of a structure involves an element of transformation and of prevision.*”

Structural analysis of the messages on Islamic-Minbar.com

Applying the third rule of observation, we begin by dissecting the entity into its essential elements. After having defined the main units (dimensions, aspects, functional elements), you have to observe each one of these units of the object separately with regard to its function. When looking into a file, you have the envelope and its contents: pages with entries, memos, letters, etc. There is also the paper, the ink, the way to write (by hand, on the type writer, on the computer), and maybe drawings. In an interview on videotape, you might separate as structural components the verbal communication from the non-verbal communication of each participating person by running sound and images on different channels.

Obviously, there are many different ways to structure a communication into functional components. The easiest way is establishing the temporal sequence of events, often with the help of graphical programming tools such as Analyst's notebook (i2).

Table 9: Messages on www.Islamic-Minbar.com as revealed by pre-analysis

Wed 9-1-2004 at 12.37	THE IRAQI ISLAMIC ARMY – DECLARATION – no comments
Wed 9-1-2004 at 16.21	LAST APPEAL TO SHEIKH + comment by al-Qayrawani + reply
Thu 9-2-2004 at 2.40	FROM THE LAND OF THE TWO RIVERS – no comments
Thu 9-2-2004 at 05.38	THE ISLAMIC ARMY DECIDED + comment by Jama'at at-T.
Fri 9-3-2004 at 06.22	REPLY TO JAMA'AT AT-TAWHID + comment by al-Maqdisi
Mon 9-6-2004 at 12.13	THE ISLAMIC ARMY – LAST DELAY – no comments
December 2004	The French hostages were released

In Table 9, we perceive a conspicuous absence of messages during Saturday and Sunday, the two days of the (Christian) weekend. This opens several possibilities of interpretation: 1) it is pure coincidence 2) Abu Muhammad has to work during weekends 3) Abu Muhammad works during the week and the messages are part of his work schedule or 4) he only has access to the Internet on weekdays (e.g. by an internet café closed on weekends). The weekend gap astonishes additionally because in Iraq, as in most Islamic countries, the weekend falls on Friday, and not on Saturday and Sunday. Thus, we may state the hypothesis that the author of the messages does not live in Iraq, but in the Western world, or in one of the rare Islamic countries following the Christian schedule such as Morocco.

Besides the temporal sequence, there are many other ways of structuring our material. Finding them is in fact the main intellectual challenge of systematic interpretation. Models often offer some help in establishing possible structures. Here are some common ways of dissecting messages into their structural components:

- *Grammatical:* words, sentences, punctuation marks, paragraphs
- *Stylistic:* personal, religious, poetic, scientific, businesslike
- *Graphical:* layout, stains, letters of the alphabet, numbers
- *Functional:* date, salutation, main body, complimentary clause, signature
- *Associative:* establishing links and hierarchy between members and associates of a terrorist group

In the investigation of major cases, one should analyze meticulously every possible structure promising meaningful results, according to the different ways of dissecting the object. Here we focus on just one example, to avoid that the article becomes boringly long. We pursue our analysis of the messages on www.islamic-minbar.com by studying their sociological structure. The following social entities can be determined:

<u>Subject:</u>	<u>Sociological reference:</u>	<u>Colour:</u>
Islamic Army	group	(pink)
Bin Laden	global Jihad	(brown)
God, the Prophet	religion	(green)
French hostages	economy	(light blue)
Iraqi People	nation	(red)
the West	politics	(dark blue)
Muslims	culture	(green)
the author himself	individual	(orange)

Using these categories, we can now split the text concerning its principal references in every respective statement. Most illustrative is the use of different colours, a procedure derived from Sapir's method of analyzing texts with SCAN.²² (The reader may mark the messages in the proposed manner.) The so achieved pattern shows that the dominant reference is the group of the Islamic Army. Yet, despite only one presumed author, hierarchical levels within the organization seem to have varying titles (the "Fatwa Office", the "High Commission of the Command", the "High Command" ...). Besides reasonable doubts about such a high and complex degree of organization, it seems unlikely that every time a different unit of the group should be responsible for issuing the bulletins on the hostage case.

Second in the line of importance is the reference to Bin Laden, uttered in tone of voice that is surprisingly disrespectful towards the presumed "Commander of Islam and of the Muslims". Further, the references to the hostages remain sparse, containing no specific information and no proof at all that the person communicating under the alibi of "Abu Muhammad" or under the "Iraqi Islamic Army" were really detaining them.

Finally, we can conclude that the third message is distinctly different from the others in several ways: it is the only one with a written in the first person singular (reference to the individual) and the only one expressing concerns for the Iraqi people (reference to the nation). Its first sentence is the only complete citation of the *Basmala* ("In the name of God, the Gentle, the Compassionate") whereas the other messages begin only with the shortened version of this formula. Contrary to the other messages, the third message contains no reference to Bin Laden and to the group.

LOOKING FOR INCOHERENT AND CONTRADICTING SIGNS

THE FORTH RULE OF SYSTEMATIC OBSERVATION:

Explore inconsistencies, errors, contradictions and coincidences on the basis of the structure

By observing each of the structural elements we get a comprehensive picture of the object. But these facts do not always constitute a coherent picture. It is important to observe and to note all signs of evidence even if they don't fit, without levelling out inconsistencies, nor exaggerating them. Sometimes it happens that one hits upon facts that make no sense at all. Should one leave them aside to avoid leaving an impression of incompetence? Most certainly not! On the contrary, it is a sign of professional authority to be able to admit that something is not (yet) understood. The very essence of every science is to register everything, especially the incomprehensible, and not only that what is already well known (*petitio principii*). It is also a matter of professional integrity to document details that seemingly contradict the given explanation.

Semiotics, the scientific study of signs, differentiates between natural and artificial signs (e.g. Umberto Eco²³). This distinction is especially important when it comes to inconsistencies. Natural signs occur without someone's intention to send a message (e.g. psychiatric symptoms, mistakes, chemical processes in a dead body, signature aspects in violent crime) whereas artificial signs are wilful communications (e.g. threat letters, staging of crimes to manipulate the police, the bait presented to potential victims in a con approach). The pioneers of profiling have pointed out that making this distinction is essential in criminal investigation.^{24, 25}

The fourth rule represents the classic reasoning of Sherlock Holmes, so to say. Yet it is not the only and certainly not the first critical thinking process involved in counterterrorism analysis or in solving criminal cases. Analysts pay a lot of attention to inconsistencies because they suspect them of being artificial signs, the assumption being that such signs possess a systematic value because they are messages from the suspect who is trying to blur the facts or to manipulate readers. But this is not always the case. People lie for many different reasons and they may hide things that have nothing to do whatsoever with the present case.

Exploring inconsistencies, contradictions and bizarre coincidences comes after the analysis of the objects in terms of functional elements or sub-units, because they need be interpreted on the grounds of the entire case, by comparing different elements with each other. A spelling mistake has another meaning if the text is written by a well-educated person than if it contains dozens of spelling mistakes.

When contradictions happen at the beginning of a case, or when they are part of a witness' or suspect's testimony, this is useful for analysts and investigators. However, sometimes there are subtle inconsistencies, which disturb a seemingly obvious case. Those are much more likely to pass unacknowledged. They can even make the analyst feel annoyed and he or she may be tempted to shove them aside, because they are likely to destroy their "beautiful" case. Giddens^{26, 27} explained: "*The work of Kuhn and other authors show that researchers ignore or want to make disappear with far-fetched explanations all those results of their experiments or observations which are incompatible with their theories or which would even prove them false.*" Therefore obeying the fourth rule also means to submit oneself to the necessity of tedious supplementary examinations.

Inconsistencies in the messages on www.Islamic-Minbar.com

Contrary to other Islamist writings, the messages of Abu Muhammad lack the usual religious (theological and jurisprudential) quotations. The only citation of a Qur'anic Verse, marked by introducing God as speaker, is found in the forth message: "The Eminent said: Thereafter it is either secure site or ransom". By consulting a concordance we can verify that the quote is indeed of Qur'anic origin. The citation stems from the fourth verse of the 47th chapter (Sura Muhammad) saying: "*Therefore, when ye meet the Unbelievers (in fight), smite at their necks; At length, when ye have thoroughly subdued them, bind a bond firmly (on them): Thereafter (is the time for) either generosity or ransom: Until the war lays down its burdens. [...]*".²⁸ By comparing the short citation in the message, consisting of only five Arabic words, with the original text, we remark that the Internet-author made not less than three mistakes. Beside a spelling error and one missing conjunction, he also replaced one word by another that makes no real sense. Therefore, it becomes obvious that he did not want to invest much effort in the study or in the correct citation of the very source of his pretended calling (the Qu'ran).

In the sixth message, we notice a contradiction in the final sentence: "Remark: We want acceptance of one of the two demands", when the author made three different demands just two lines before. Moreover, three days before, all claims had already been dismissed by the fifth message. Another inconsistency concerns the designation of the group. Generally it is called "Iraqi Islamic Army", but in the last two messages it appears as the "Islamic Army in Iraq". Is this an indication that they abandon the intention of being representative for the Iraqi people? Such a shift is barely plausible.

Furthermore, we saw that Abu Muhammad, or whoever hides behind this name, has shown open arrogance and impatience towards Bin Laden. He makes unrealistic demands to his perceived hero, thus loosing credibility.

In the light of these elements we must ask, whether this picture is consistent with a member of an organized and operative Jihadist group and with the alleged situation. It is true, that in a study in the mid-1980es Strentz²⁹ found Middle Eastern terror groups to be poorly educated, unskilled, unemployed, illiterate, undisciplined, and ill-trained. Likewise, the debriefing of former hostages of a Jihadist group in the Sahara has shown that some of the terrorists were disorganized and childish individuals. The poorly educated style of the messages in itself is therefore not contradicting the hypothesis of genuine communications by a terrorist group. So, as is often the case, we have here some non-conclusive evidence. We also take care to note and to comment on it, because in the context of more pieces of intelligence this may turn out to reveal new insights at a later stage of the analysis.

FIND NEGATIVE SIGNS: WHAT IS MISSING?

THE FIFTH RULE OF SYSTEMATIC OBSERVATION:

Discover the absence of signs (negative signs) on the grounds of what should be found according to the models' structures

The last characteristic that distinguishes the excellent observer from the ordinary is the capacity to find out what is missing. In psychiatry a lack of important mental functions (for example the lack of emotional responses), is called a negative symptom. Nordby³⁰ noted on the difference between signs of evidence and proof: "*Absence of proof is not proof of absence, but the absence of a sign can itself be a sign.*"

For instance in a case with several witnesses, not all of which are cooperative, one can systematically filter out what has been omitted by whom, in order to have more material for the following interrogations. The lack of the appropriate emotional response from supposed victims of crime can also be an important clue that something is wrong with their statements. Statement analysis³¹ often focuses on missing elements in a communication.

Missing signs in the messages posted on Islamic-Minbar.com

Compared to other manifestos and to experience, several points are missing in our case: There is no ideological or political program proffered, only a rather vague sympathy for Jihad and the Muslims. No leader of the group is ever mentioned and no emblem is shown either. Even if the first absence can be explained by protecting the anonymity of wanted suspects, the organization's insignia is known to the public from a (meanwhile blocked) website and from other publications about the group.³²

Furthermore, Abu Muhammad—contrary to other hostage takers who enforce their claims by some proof of the capturing of the victim—offers no information at all about the hostage. Finally, all the information posted on www.islamic-minbar.com could just as well be recycled from the media.

CHECKING HYPOTHESES FOR PLAUSIBILITY WITH A CROSS-TABLE

Kind³³ defined: “[...] *the identification of pattern in crime investigation may perhaps be defined simply as the identification of a deterministic sequence in a series of apparently chance events.*” An unsystematic exploration of potentially meaningful details does bear a certain danger: How can we be sure that we have collected all crucial elements? How can we know that we have not been misled into too much speculation? How can we avoid losing ourselves in farfetched hypotheses? What is to be done when a controversy over different conflicting hypotheses arises? Nordby³⁴ explained why observers can come to very different conclusions on the same case: “*Part of seeing a sign involves recognizing its significance and building it into an inference. Dismissing signs and what follows deductively from them as irrelevant along one path, and including them as relevant along another, may result in contradictory conclusions drawn from the same observations.*”

Based on this, we can say that the processes of observation and interpretation are composed by two inverse ways of thinking: inclusion and exclusion. At first we need to include every aspect that could eventually be essential, then, in a second step, we have to dismiss everything that is not important. But at the beginning we don't know which is which—even if we believe to know. Given the fact that signs of evidence don't necessarily speak for themselves, we are obliged to complete our knowledge about a case in a most exhaustive way.

This task can be accomplished by the applying the five rules of systematic observation. But in a second phase of reasoning, we have to criticize ourselves on all paths, which seem to be too speculative and we have to set aside (without eliminating it completely) successively everything that seems to be less important. Again, we want to leave nothing to chance. We need to do this process in a rational and methodological way and account for all the information we gathered in the previous phase by doing it with the help of a checklist (Table 10).

Thus, we now refocus on the initial question of authenticity and the hypothesis (called H) that Abu Muhammad (AM) is indeed representing a militant group in Iraq who have taken the French hostages. The antithesis (not-H) states that somebody else hides behind the alibi of this name: somebody who wants to pull a hoax or a wannabe terrorist producing propaganda. It is also useful to note all signs pointing to neither of the hypotheses (indeterminate signs), because later, when we might have more information, we might want to re-adapt our hypotheses.

Table 10: Plausibility check of the hypotheses in a cross-table

Signs for H (AM represents terrorists)	Indeterminate signs	Signs for not-H (AM = wannabe-terrorist)
AM declares himself being a member of the Iraqi Islamic Army.	AM is not a scholar of the Qur'an and religion.	According to dialectal markers, AM seems to be of Maghrebian origin.
AM is not denounced as an impostor by the group's known sources.	AM seems to be intimidated by <i>Jama'at at-Tawhid al-Islamiyya</i> .	No proof for the authenticity of AM's claims is ever delivered.
AM mentions an incident in at-Tayfiyya that seems to be insider's knowledge.	Internet forums are available for everybody, even those with membership restriction.	Another chat-room participant doubts the authority of AM and his claims.
AM refers to Bin Laden and his global Jihad concept.	AM makes a lot of orthographical mistakes, seems to be uneducated.	AM lacks logic in his demands and renounces that they are all fulfilled.
AM could be under considerable time stress.		More than one author (divergent third message) uses the pseudonym AM.
		AM respects Christian weekend not applied in Iraq.
		The name of the group and its sub-units lack consistency.
		AM has an arrogant and impatient attitude towards Bin Laden.
		The messages of AM lack a clear ideological or political standpoint.
		AM offers no proof that he is familiar with the hostage.
...

Sometimes, it is not easy to categorize the collected signs. For example, one could presume that there is a whole group behind Abu Muhammad, since different people seem to write under this pseudonym, and classify this observation in the first column (for H). But as experts in Islamist terrorism we know that Jihadists generally do not share pseudonyms and will classify the information pointing towards the antithesis “not-H”.

For the plausibility check, a qualified expert must compare the columns. One should not only take into account the sheer number of signs pointing towards one hypothesis, but also their authenticity and their specific significance. If the one column exceeds considerably the other regarding the amount of its signs, we must also consider soft criteria such as which signs belong to the best confirmed intelligence and which are most significant.

In our case a comprehensive view of table 10 points towards the assumption that Abu Muhammad does not belong to a group of hostage takers and is not member of an Islamist militant group in Iraq.

If the category “indeterminate” should contain most of the entries, the collected signs are probably not suitable to favor one particular hypothesis and the riddle remains unresolved.

ADVANTAGES OF THE METHOD OF SYSTEMATIC OBSERVATION

The method of systematic observation presents the obvious advantage to provide the analyst with an inventory of all relevant pieces of intelligence. Traditional conclusions are usually justified by a handful of arguments, thus permitting other analysts to offer totally different conclusions by stressing the importance of other pieces of information. On such a basis, no one can decide whose arguments are better, because the entire set of all signs of evidence remains vague.

For example, one analyst could discard the hypothesis on the main basis of the linguistic signs, claiming that a representative of an Iraqi insurgent group can not speak a Maghrebian idiom. However, another analyst may counter this argument by pointing out that volunteers from all Arab countries are fighting in the Iraqi insurgency.³⁵ Admitting that a degree of uncertainty always persists, the result of an intelligence analysis becomes more credible on the basis of a comprehensive picture of all signs.

Another advantage is the fact that the collection of intelligence was not guided in a teleological way by an initial question. Hence, the assembled signs can easily serve to verify any other hypothesis. For instance, some signs indicate an immature character (unrealistic demands, fresh attitude, being intimidated when confronted with a name of another group etc.). We may therefore presume that the author of the messages could be an adolescent Maghrebian living in Europe full of his own importance who likes to show off while chatting on the web. This supposition is also of concern for Homeland security agencies, as disoriented adolescents seeking recognition are easy prey to manipulation and are actively targeted by terrorist groups for recruitment.

Now, to test this new hypothesis, we do not need to re-examine all six messages. We just have to redistribute the listed signs into a new cross-table and to assess it in terms of plausibility, while some signs might have to be weighted differently. Anyway, the analysis will proceed significantly faster now. The more complex and changing an object of observation is, the greater is the benefit of the systematic approach, particularly for the continuing analysis of extremist groups and their evolving activism.

SUMMARY

The five easily memorized formulas of Systematic Observation help the analyst to be a more proficient observer and to make sure that nothing has been left out. They are:

- I. Compare the object of observation to models or to similar cases.
- II. Separate formal aspects from the contents and analyze them separately.
- III. Structure the object into functional elements, and explore every one of them.

- IV. Explore inconsistencies, contradictions, mistakes, or astonishing coincidences.
- V. Discover the absence of signs (negative signs of evidence).

Only after going through the process of systematically registering every import detail, we are able to draw first hypotheses. Then, hypotheses must be checked for their plausibility in listing systematically every sign for and every sign against them, as well as all indeterminate signs, too, in order to get a clear view of the case, and to ensure the best use of the available intelligence.

It is true that the consequent use of those formulas demands a considerable initial effort, which can only be afforded in cases of some importance. But then, with experience and routine, analysts will grasp much more signs of evidence right from the beginning, and save themselves a lot of unnecessary work that can be caused by pursuing wrong assumptions. In the long run, the assembled inventory of signs evidence does not lose its value. Undoubtedly, by applying the presented rules of systematic observation, the result of our work will be of higher analytical value.

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¹ The case-presentation in this paper and its conclusions were specifically adapted and shortened for teaching purposes. As we present this example, all information used in this paper is drawn from open source intelligence. It is understood that interpretations based on other sources (field operations, signal intelligence, human intelligence, etc.) could lead to different results. Furthermore: The authors of the paper and the Director of the Swiss Intelligence Service SAP have no part at all in the prosecution of the case and are not aware of the evidence collected in the subsequent criminal investigation. This illustration reflects only a small and isolated part of the available evidence of the real case. Under no circumstances can the contents of this paper be used to prove, support, or contest anything in Court.

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